P. W. JOYCE

THE STORY OF ANCIENT IRISH CIVILIZATION

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PREFACE.

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This little book has been written and published with the main object of spreading as widely as possible among our people, young and old, a knowledge of the civilisation and general social condition of Ireland from the fifth or sixth to the twelfth century, when it was wholly governed by native rulers. The publication comes at an appropriate time, when there is an awakening of interest in the Irish language, and in Irish lore of every kind, unparalleled in our history.

But the book has a further mission. There are many English and many Anglo-Irish people who think, merely from ignorance, that Ireland was a barbarous and half-savage country before the English came among the people and civilised them. This book, so far as it finds its way among the two classes above mentioned, will, I fancy, open their eyes. They will learn from it that the old Irish, so far from being barbarous, were a bright, intellectual, and cultured people; that they had professions, trades, and industries pervading the whole population, with clearly defined ranks and grades of society, all working under an elaborate system of native laws; and that in the steadying and civilising arts and pursuits of everyday life they were as well advanced, as orderly, and as regular as any other European people of the same period. They will find too that, as regards education, scholarship, and general mental culture, the Irish of those early ages were in advance of all other countries of Europe; that they helped most materially to spread Christianity, and to revive learning, all over the

Continent; and that to Irish missionaries and scholars, the Anglo-Saxons of the Heptarchy were indebted for the greater part of their Christianity, and for the preservation and restoration of learning when it was threatened with extinction all over England by the ravages of the Danes.

But there were, and are, Englishmen better informed about our country. More than three hundred years ago the great English poet, Edmund Spenser, lived for some time in Ireland, and made himself well acquainted with its history. He knew what it was in past ages; so that in one of his poems he speaks of the time

> “When Ireland flourishèd in fame
> Of wealth and goodnesse, far above the rest
> Of all that beare the British Islands name.”

But it is better not to pursue these observations farther here, as it would be only anticipating what will be found in the body of the book.

This book is the last of a series of three, of which the second is abridged from the first, and the third from both.

The First—“A Social History of Ancient Ireland” (2 vols., richly gilt, both cover and top, in 31 chapters, with 361 Illustrations)—contains a complete survey of the Social Life and Institutions of Ancient Ireland. All the important statements in it are proved home by references to authorities, and by quotations from ancient documents.

The Second—“A Smaller Social History of Ancient Ireland” (1 vol., cloth, gilt, 598 pages, in 27 chapters, with 213 Illustrations)—traverses the same ground as the larger work; but, besides condensation, most of the illustrative

quotations and nearly all the references to authorities are omitted.

This Third book—“The Story of Ancient Irish Civilisation”—gives in simple, plain language, an account of the condition of the country in the olden time; but as it is here to speak for itself, I need not describe it further. For all the statements it contains, full and satisfactory authorities will be found in the two larger works.

I have done my best to make all three readable and interesting, as well as instructive.

The ordinary history of our country has been written by many, and the reader has a wide choice. But in the matter of our Social History he has no choice at all. For these three books of mine have, for the first and only time, brought within the reach of the general public a knowledge of the whole social life of Ancient Ireland.

P. W. J.

Lyre-na-Grena,
February, 1907.

The old Irish writers commonly prefixed to their books or treatises a brief statement of “Place, Time, Person, and Cause.” My larger Social History, following the old custom, opens with a statement of this kind, which reappears in the Preface to the Smaller Social History, and which may be appropriately repeated here:—

> The Place, Time, Author, and Cause of Writing, of this book, are:—Its place is Lyre-na-Grena, Leinster-road, Rathmines, Dublin; its time is the year of our Lord one

thousand nine hundred and seven; the author is Patrick Weston Joyce, Doctor of Laws; and the cause of writing the same book is to give glory to God, honour to Ireland, and knowledge to those who desire to learn all about the Old Irish People.

CHAPTER I.

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HOW THE ANCIENT IRISH PEOPLE WERE GOVERNED BY THEIR KINGS AND CHIEFS.

There were in Ireland, from times beyond the reach of history, kings, who were of various grades according to the extent of the country or district they ruled over. The highest of all was the king of Ireland, who lived in the royal palace at Tara. He was called the Ard-ri [ard-ree], *i.e.*, 'High king' or Over-king, because he claimed authority over all the others. There was also a king over each of the five provinces—Leinster, Munster, Connaught, Ulster, and Meath—who were subject to the Ard-ri. The provinces were divided into a number of territories, over which were kings of a still lower grade, each under the king of his own province. If the district was not large enough to have a king, it was ruled by a chief, who was subject to the king of the larger territory in which the district was included.

The king was always chosen from one particular ruling family; and when a king died, those chiefs who had votes held a meeting, lasting for three days and three nights, at which they elected whatever member of that family they considered the wisest, best, and bravest. After this a day was fixed for inaugurating the new king, a ceremony corresponding in some respects with the *crowning* of our present monarchs. This Inauguration, or 'making' of a king as it is called in Irish, was a great affair, and was attended by all the leading people, both clergymen and laymen. There was always one particular spot for the ceremony, on

which usually stood a high mound or fort, with an ‘Inauguration Stone’ on top, and often a great branching old tree, under the shade of which the main proceedings were carried on.

The new king, standing on the Inauguration Stone, swore a solemn oath in the hearing of all, that he would govern his people with strict justice, and that he would observe the laws of the land, and maintain the old customs of the tribe or kingdom. Then he put by his sword; and one of the chiefs, whose special office it was, put into his hand a long, straight, white wand. This was to signify that he was to govern, not by violence or harshness, but by justice, and that his decisions were to be straight and stainless like the wand. Several other forms had to be gone through till the ceremony was completed; and he was then the lawful king.

The old Irish kings lived in great style, especially those of the higher ranks, and—like the kings of our own day—kept in their palaces numbers of persons to attend on them, holding various offices, all with good salaries. The higher the grade of the king the greater the number of his household, and the grander the persons holding offices. Forming part of his retinue there were nobles, who did nothing at all but wait on him, merely to do him honour. There were *Ollaves*, i.e., learned and distinguished men, of the several professions—Historians, Poets, Physicians, Builders, Brehons or Judges, Musicians, and so forth. All were held in high honour, and exercised their several professions for the benefit of the king and his household, for which each had a house and a tract of land free, or some other equivalent stipend.

Then there was a house-steward, who issued orders each day for the provisions to be laid in for next day—the number of oxen, sheep, and hogs to be slaughtered, the quantity of bread to be baked, and of ale, mead, and wine to be measured out; and he regulated the reception of guests, their arrangement at banquets, and their sleeping accommodation; with numerous other matters of a like kind, all pertaining to the household. His word was law, and no one ever thought of questioning his arrangements. The house-steward's office was one of great responsibility, and he had plenty of anxiety and worry; and accordingly he held a high rank, and was well paid for his services.

There was a champion—a fierce and mighty man—who answered challenges, and, when necessary, fought single combats for the honour of the king. Guards were always at hand, who remained standing up with drawn swords or battleaxes during dinner. There was a master of horse, with numerous grooms; keepers of the king's jewels and chessboards; couriers or runners to convey the king's messages and orders, and to bring him tidings; keepers of hounds and coursing dogs; a chief swineherd, with his underlings; fools, jugglers, and jesters for the amusement of the company; with a whole army of under-servants and workmen of various kinds.

Each day the whole company sat in the great hall at dinner, arranged at tables in the order of rank the great grandees and the ollaves near the king, others of less importance lower down, while the attendants—when they were not otherwise occupied—sat at tables of their own at the lower end of the hall. To pay the expenses of his great

household, and to enable him to live in grandeur as a king should live, he had a large tract of land free, besides which, every tenant and householder throughout his dominion had to make a yearly payment according to his means. These payments were made, not in money—for there was little or no coined money then—but *in kind*; that is to say, cattle and provisions of various sorts, plough-oxen, hogs, sheep, with mantles and other articles of dress; also dyestuffs, sewing-thread, firewood, horses, rich bridles, chessboards, jewellery, and sometimes gold and silver reckoned out in ounces, as Abraham paid Ephron for the cave of Machpelah. Much income also accrued to the king from other sources not mentioned here; and he wanted it all, for he was expected to be lavish in giving presents, and hospitable without stint in receiving and entertaining guests.

Besides all this, the king often went on what was called a ‘Free Circuit,’ *i.e.*, a visitation through his dominions, moving quite leisurely in his chariot from place to place, with a numerous retinue, all in their own chariots; while the several sub-kings through whose territories he passed had to lodge, feed, and entertain the whole company free, while they remained.

These old Irish kings—when they were not engaged in war—seem to have led a free and easy life, and to have had a pleasanter time of it than the kings and emperors of our own day.

The Irish took care that their kings had not too much power in their hands; so that they could not always do as they pleased—a proper and wise arrangement. They were what we now call ‘limited monarchs’; that is, they could not

enter on any important undertaking affecting the kingdom or the public without consulting their people. On such occasions the king had to call a meeting of his chief men, and ask their advice, and, if necessary, take their votes when there was a difference of opinions. And besides this, kings, as we shall see farther on, had to obey the law the same as their subjects.

Each king, of whatever grade, should, according to law, have at least three chief residences; and he lived in them by turns, as suited his fancy or convenience. Nearly all those old palaces are known at the present day; and in most of them the ramparts and mounds are still to be seen, more or less dilapidated after the long lapse of time. The ruins of the most important ones—such as we see them now—are described in some detail in my two Social Histories of Ancient Ireland; but here our space will not permit us to mention more than a few.

The most important of all is Tara, the chief residence of the over-kings, which is situated on the summit of a gentle green hill, six miles from Navan in Meath, and two miles from the Midland Railway station of Kilmessan. The various mounds, circular ramparts, and other features are plainly marked on the plan given at the beginning of this book; and anyone who walks over the hill with the plan in his hand can easily recognise them.

Next to Tara in celebrity was the palace of Emain or Emania, the residence of the kings of Ulster, and the chief home of Concobar Mac Nessa and the Red Branch Knights. The imposing remains of this palace, consisting of a great mound surrounded by an immense circular rampart and

fosse half obliterated, the whole structure covering about eleven English acres, lie two miles west of Armagh.

Another Ulster palace, quite as important as Emain, was Ailech, the ruins of which are situated in County Donegal, on the summit of a hill 800 feet high, five miles north-west from Derry. It is a circular stone fortress of dry masonry, still retaining its old name in the form of “Greenan-Ely.”

The chief palace of the kings of Connaught was Croghan, the old fort of which lies three miles from Tulsk in Roscommon.

The most important residence of the Leinster kings was Aillenn, now called Knockaulin, an immense fort surrounding the summit of a hill near Kilcullen in Kildare.

Besides these there are the Munster palaces, the Rock of Cashel, Kincora at Killaloe, Bruree in Limerick, and Caher in Tipperary: also we have Naas in Kildare, Dunlavin in Wicklow, Dinnree in Carlow, and many others.

CHAPTER II.

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HOW THE WARLIKE OLD IRISH CONQUERED FOREIGN LANDS.

From the remotest times the Irish had a genius for war and a love of fighting; and if it fell within the scope of this narrative, it would be easy to show that these features in our character have come down to the present day. For good or for bad, we are, and always have been, a fighting race.

In old times the ‘Scots’—as the Irish were then called—were well known for their warlike qualities, and very much dreaded; so that fabulous rumours regarding them ran among some of the people of the Continent. One Latin writer tells us that Irish mothers were wont to present the first food on the point of a sword to their newly-born male infants, as a sort of dedication to war. This is certainly an invention, for it is not mentioned in our own records; but it indicates the character the Irish people had earned for themselves abroad. They fought a great deal too much among themselves at home; but in this respect they were not a bit worse than the English people at the time of the Heptarchy or than the Continental nations of the same period.

That the old Irish should be warlike is only what we might expect; seeing that they were in great measure descended from the Continental Gauls, who in ancient times were renowned as warriors and conquerors. But mighty as the Gauls were, and though they were at least as brave as the Romans, they were subdued in the end by superior

discipline, when Julius Cæsar invaded them. And so with the old Irish. Though they were fierce and strong, and taken man for man quite a match for the Anglo-Normans, they were forced, after a long struggle, to yield to science, skill, and discipline, when they were invaded by that people—then the greatest warriors in the world.

The Irish were not content with fighting at home, but made themselves formidable in foreign lands. Their chief foreign conquests were in Wales and Scotland; but they frequently found their way to the Continent. Irish literature of every kind abounds in records of foreign raids, invasions, and inter-marriages; and in many particulars these native accounts are borne out by authorities that no one questions, namely, Roman classical writers, whenever they find occasion to touch on these matters.

Those who have read the early history of England will remember that the Picts and Scots, marching southwards from the Scottish Highlands, gave much trouble, year after year, for a long period, to the Romans and Britons. The Picts were the people of Scotland at the time; and the Scots were the Irish, who, crossing over to Alban or Scotland in their *curragh* fleets, joined the Picts in their formidable raids southwards. We know all this, not only from our own native historians, but also from Roman writers, who tell us how the Romans had often to fight in Britain against the Scots from Ireland.

In order to protect the British people against these two fierce nations, the Romans, at different intervals in the second and third centuries, built great walls or ramparts from sea to sea, between Britain and Alban, of which the

ruins are still to be seen: one beginning at the Frith of Clyde and another at the Solway Frith.

For several hundred years—from the third to the sixth century, and even after—the Irish streamed continually to Scotland across the narrow sea. The first of these migrations of which we have reliable accounts originated in a famine, exactly as the great exodus of our own day from Ireland to America was set going by the terrible famine of 1847. And this migration is related partly by old Irish writers, and partly by the great English historian, the Venerable Bede.

The famine in question fell on Munster early in the third century, so that numbers of people were forced to leave the province. One particular chief led a great host of fighting men, with their families, northwards, till they reached the extreme district now known as the county Antrim. Here they divided: and while one part remained in Ireland (*i.e.*, in Antrim), the other part, under the same leader mentioned above, crossed over to Alban or Scotland, where they settled down. From this time forward, there was a continual migration, year after year, from the northern coast to Scotland, till, after the lapse of about three centuries, occurred the greatest invasion of all, led by the three brothers, Fergus, Angus, and Lorne, in the year 503.

It has been already related in our Histories of Ireland, and need not be repeated in detail here, how these colonists ultimately mastered the country, over which their first king, Fergus, ruled; how they gave Scotland its name; how the subsequent kings of Scotland were the direct descendants of Fergus; and how from him again, through the Stuarts,

descend, in one of their lines of pedigree, our present royal family.

At about the same period the Irish mastered and peopled the Isle of Man; and for centuries there was constant intercourse between the parent people of the north-east coast of Ireland and this little colony. Though the Norsemen wrested the sovereignty of the island from them in the ninth century, they did not succeed in displacing either the Gaelic people or their language. The best possible proof that the Irish colonised and held possession of Man for ages is the fact that the Manx language is nothing more than Irish Gaelic, slightly changed by lapse of time. There are also still to be seen all over the island Irish buildings and monuments, mixed up, however, with many of Norse origin; and the great majority of both the place-names and the native family-names are Gaelic.

In our old historical books we have accounts of migrations of Irish people to Wales, some as invaders intending to return, some as colonists purposing to settle and remain. At this time the Romans were masters of England and Wales, but they were not as mighty a people in the fourth century as they had been previously; for on the Continent the northern barbarians were pressing on them everywhere; and in Britain the Picts and Scots, as we have said, kept continually harassing them from the north.

These raids became at last so intolerable, that the Roman government sent an able general named Theodosius (father of the emperor Theodosius the Great) to Britain to check them. At the very time that Theodosius was in Britain, a brave and strong-handed king reigned in Tara, named

Criffan (A.D., 366 to 379), who on several occasions invaded Britain, and took possession of large tracts, so that he is called in our old records “Criffan the Great, king of Ireland, and of Albion to the British Channel.” The Roman historians tell us that Theodosius succeeded in beating back the Picts and Scots, and even chased them out to sea, in which there is probably some exaggeration, as there is, no doubt, on the part of our own historians in calling Criffan “King of Albion to the British Channel.”

Criffan was succeeded by Niall of the Nine Hostages (A.D. 379 to 405), who was still more distinguished for foreign conquests than his predecessor. He invaded Britain on a more extensive and formidable scale than had yet been attempted, and swept over a large extent of country, bringing away immense booty and whole crowds of captives, but was at length forced to retreat by the valiant Roman general Stilicho. On this occasion a Roman poet, praising Stilicho, says of him—speaking as Britannia:—“By him was I protected when the Scot [*i.e.*, Niall] moved all Ireland against me, and the ocean foamed with their hostile oars.”

For the extensive scale of these terrible raids we have the testimony of the best possible authority—St. Patrick—who, in his “Confession,” speaking of the expedition in which he himself was taken captive (probably that led by Niall), says:—“I was about sixteen years of age, when I was brought captive into Ireland *with many thousand persons*.”

The preceding were warlike raids; but no doubt, while the main body of the host returned on each occasion to their homes in Ireland, large numbers remained and settled down

in Wales. But we have an account of at least one expedition undertaken with the direct object of colonising. In the third century, a powerful tribe called the Desii, who occupied the territory of *Deece*, near Tara, were expelled from the district by King Cormac Mac Art, for a serious breach of law. Part of these went to Munster, and settled in a territory which still bears their name, the barony of Decies, in Waterford. Another part, crossing over to Wales under one of their leaders, took possession of a district called Dyfed, where they settled down and kept themselves distinct as an immigrant tribe, speaking their own language for generations, till at length they were absorbed by the more numerous population around them, just as, many centuries later, the Anglo-Normans who came to Ireland were absorbed by the Irish.

We are told in Cormac's Glossary that in those times it was quite a usual thing for Irish chiefs to own two territories, one in Ireland and the other in Wales; and that they visited and lived in each by turns, as suited their convenience or pleasure. And the Irish chiefs often crossed over to receive the tributes due to them from their Welsh possessions.

Plain marks and tokens of these migrations and settlements exist in Wales at the present day, as we are told by eminent Welsh writers who have examined the question. Numerous places are still called after Irishmen, as, for instance, Holyhead, of which the Welsh name means the 'Rocks of the Gaels.' The Irish, wherever they settled down in Wales, built for themselves circular forts, as was their custom at home in Ireland. Many of these remain to this day, and are called 'Irishmen's Cottages.' Moreover, the